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ABSTRACT

The image and interactions of the black family depicted on television were investigated in order to determine whether changes occurred in the imagery and interactions of black television families between 1980 and 1985, and to compare the family structures and interactive behavior on situation comedies portraying nuclear black families during the 1985-86 season. A random selection of shows from three situation comedies--"The Cosby Show," "227," and "Charlie & Company"--were coded for the variables of role significance, dress, occupational status, competence, and wealth. Preliminary analysis, including the following findings, indicated that a more positive portrayal of black families is currently emerging: (1) families have both husband and wife present; (2) spouses interact frequently, equally, and lovingly with each other; (3) children are treated with respect and taught achievement-oriented values; and (4) this activity takes place in a positive atmosphere with little conflict. (12 references) (Author/MES)

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BLACK FAMILY IMAGERY AND INTERACTIONS ON TELEVISION: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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Black Family Imagery and Interactions on Television: A Preliminary Analysis

Introduction

Most people would probably agree with the assertion that "the family is at once the most sensitive, important, and enduring element in the culture of any people" (Billingsley, 1968). For it is within the family--the principal socializer--that an individual's personality and identity are formed and norms and values of particular cultures and subcultures are transmitted. Perhaps because of this central role that the family plays in the socialization of individuals, the family has been of great interest to scholars and laymen alike.

The portrayal of family life has captured the attention of viewers since television was introduced into American society. As Glennon & Butsch (1982) pointed out many of the more than 200 fictional families that have appeared in "family series" since 1946 are known and loved by millions of Americans. The Nelsons (The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet); the Cleavers (Leave It to Beaver); the Bunkers (All in the Family) and the Waltons, The Jeffersons, and so forth, have all become a part of our collective history and culture (Glennon & Butsch, 1982).

History of Black Family Portrayal

Television series' featuring the black family have been an integral part of network programming schedules since the 50s. The image and portrayal of these families have been revised and modified according to the politics of the time period in which they appeared and the ingenuity of the writers and producers who created them.

Until the late 1960s, Black family appearances on television were rare, the exception being the infamous show, "Amos 'n' Andy," which depicted several families. One was mother (Momma) and daughter Sapphire, another was husband Andy (Kingfish) and wife Sapphire; and the other was husband Amos, wife Ruby, and children. In the 1968-1969 season, along with the increase in Black portrayals, came one of the first Black family series since "Amos 'n' Andy" -- a show entitled "Julia." Starring Diahann Carroll as Julia, the show featured a middle-class widowed Black woman and her young son.

The 70s was "the era" of the black television family. Situation comedies and dramas profiled diverse black families (in terms of wealth, lifestyle, politics, and makeup) during this decade. Among the Black family shows aired during the 1970s were the following:

(1) "That's My Mama" which featured a mother and a grown son;

(2) "Good Times" which was initially comprised of a mother, father, daughter, and two sons living in a project;

(3) "Sandford and Son" which featured a father and a grown son who lived together and were junkmen;

(4) "Baby, I'm Back" which featured a father who had previously deserted his wife and two children but later wanted to reenter their lives;

(5) "The Jeffersons" which was initially comprised of a mother, father, and son who eventually moved from the working class to a middle-class existence; and

(6) "What's Happening" which featured a divorced mother struggling to raise a son and a daughter.

Norman Lear's comedies portrayed the one-parent family ("Sandford and Son," "What's Happening") and the two-parent household ("Good Times," "Jeffersons") while other producers contributed similar fair with "Baby, I'm Back" and "That's my Momma."

Dramas of the 70s offered the critically acclaimed and viewer supported "Roots I and II" and "Harris and Company." "Palmerstown, U.S.A." produced as an outgrowth of the "Roots" series inaugurated the 80s. Public Television also made its contribution to the black family when Avon Kirkland's "Up and Coming" began airing. The television hit of the 1984-85 season was the black family presented in "The Cosby Show." CBS followed this lead and "Charlie & Co." was added to its

line-up, while NBC scheduled another black family situation comedy, "227."

Research on Black Family Portrayal

Research concerning the images these black families portrayed on television is scarce and generally concentrates on the black family in situation comedies. One researcher, Gordon Berry (1980) identified frequent representations of black, minority, and lower class lifestyles appearing on television and concluded that family presentations are disrupted by parent and sibling aggressive behavior; families show a continuous picture of female-dominated households whether or not a male is present; family life portrays frequent friction between males and females; and, family portrayals show children with little supervision and love. Earlier research by Greenberg and Atkin (1978) supports some of the above notions. They observed several situation comedies with black families ("What's Happening," "Sanford and Son," and "Good Times," etc.) and concluded that black families are isolated from whites, are more likely to be without a father, and black mothers are more dominant when critical family decisions are made.

"The Jeffersons" may be used as an example to illustrate the portrayal of Black family life. The longest-running Black family show, "The Jeffersons" provides us with a view of a stable upper-middle class Black family. The father, George Jefferson, is a very competent businessman who has succeeded in obtaining material success for his wife, Louise, and son, Lionel. However, his impetuous personality results in a great deal of conflict between him and his compassionate, strong-willed wife, Louise, and the ever-present, belligerent maid, Florence.

What images of Black family life emerge from the show? On a positive note, we see a Black father succeeding as a professional, as well as maintaining a deep interest in family affairs. We also see glimpses of strong kinship ties as exemplified in an extended family framework. Unfortunately, however, George's tendency to enage in verbal battle leaves the impression of a Black family beset with internal conflicts. Moreover, Louise's attempts to reason with George are frequently reminiscent of the Black matriarchal stereotype.

The characteristics or compositions of Black family shows appearing from 1969 to 1982 may be summarized as follows. All of these shows were situation comedies. Few of them featured a husband, wife, and children living together. Furthermore, few of these shows portrayed a lifestyle other

than that of a poor struggling Black family. Moreover, members of televised Black families are constantly amused by their limited skills and resources and their resultant powerlessness to improve the quality of their lives (Stroman, 1986).

As a result, viewers of these shows may come to believe or expect that: (1) all Blacks come from a single parent home (usually the single parent is a mother); (2) the Black mother is an overly aggressive, dominating person; (3) the Black father is an irresponsible person who exhibits little concern for his family's welfare; (4) there is little love and affection among Black family members; (5) Black mothers and fathers are unable to assume professional positions; (6) Black family life is characterized by frequent conflicts; and (7) all Blacks come from poor homes (Berry, 1980; Stroman, 1983). All of this corroborates James Comer's (1982) observations that the impression often received from television is that Blacks cannot care for their families adequately, that they are not responsible, and that they are not competent.

Much of the above is concerned with the images emanating from Black family shows. The findings of the studies reported above concerned the image of the Black television family.

What of their intra-family communication techniques? When reviewing the body of research on black family interactions, few studies in the literature have investigated this component of the topic. Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg (1980) compared the characters and behaviors of television blacks with television whites who appeared on the same programs by examining their interactions in terms of frequency, content, and major topics. Greenberg and Neuendorf (1980), however, observed the interactions of Black and white families. Their findings indicate that within Black families on television the Black males were more active in family interactions than white males; the Black sons played a more active role than Black daughters or white children; and, conflict as the content of family interactions was more prevalent in Black family units when compared to white family units.

In an effort to expand and add to the knowledge on the subject area, this study investigated the image and the interactions of the Black family depicted on television. The purposes of this study were (1) to determine whether changes occurred in the imagery and interactions of Black television families between 1980 and 1985; and (2) to compare the family structures and interactive behavior of the three situation comedies that portrayed nuclear Black families and were aired during the 1985-86 television season.

The three situation comedies utilized in this study were (1) "The Cosby Show," which featured a mother, a father, 4 daughters and a son; (2) "227", which was comprised of a mother, father, and one daughter; and (3) "Charlie & Company," featuring a mother, father, two sons, and a daughter.

Method

One-third of each of the shows aired during the season were randomly selected, coded, and analyzed. Coding was done by two persons who worked in pairs. Coder reliability tests, which were done periodically on all content variables, were always above .90.

Modifications of the definitions utilized by Seggar (1975), Hinton, et. al. (1974) and DeFleur (1964) to determine imagery were adopted for use in the present study: (1) Role significance: The classification of family member portrayals as major, supporting, minor and bit part; (2) Dress: Classification of clothing apparel as showing, "well-dressed," ordinary, or poor; (3) Occupational status: Classification of clearly observable tasks being performed that can be classified utilizing the broad occupational categories used by the Census Bureau; and (4) Competence: The classification of intelligence displayed through the ideas proposed or the

actual successful and effective completion or carrying out of a task. Four categories were established as very competent, generally competent, sometimes incompetent, and very incompetent. (5) Wealth: determined by context, possessions, and special access to facilities and things. Categories of wealthy, comfortable, ordinary, and poor were established. Interactive behavior was coded according to frequency and mode (giving only, giving and taking--mostly giving, equal give and take, giving and taking--mostly taking, and taking only). In addition, interactions were coded for the presence of conflict and according to who initiated or received the interaction. Interactions began when something was said between one or more of the characters and ended when one of the characters left the scene, or a new character entered (Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg, 1980).

Findings

The first question to be addressed is what image of Black family life emerges from the 3 shows included in this study. Regarding role significance, all of the family members assumed major or supporting roles, and all were portrayed as being generally competent or very competent.

In contrast to previous shows where the majority of Black families were lower-class and rather poorly dressed, the families in "227" and "Charlie & Company" are working middle-class, and the family in the "Cosby Show" is definitely upper-middle class, with dress ranging from ordinary to well-dressed on all 3 shows. As to overall wealth, the Huxtables ("The Cosby Show") are home owners, relatively wealthy, and live in a New York brownstone that is nicely furnished; the Jenkins ("227") and the Richmonds ("Charlie & Company") rent their apartments and enjoy rather ordinary-to-comfortable lifestyles.

Occupation-wise, the mother and father on the "Cosby Show" are an attorney and obstetrician respectively. The mother on "Charlie & Company" is a school teacher and the father works for the Department of Transportation. The mother on "227" does not work; initially the father was a blue-collar worker, but later he was promoted to a professional/managerial position.

Clearly, these shows offer a different, more positive view of Black family life.

We now examine and compare family role interactions among characters on the 3 shows. In terms of mode of interaction, that is giving, seeking, or receiving advice, information, or orders, the data reveal that most of the

interactions appearing on all 3 shows was equal give and take. Specifically, 81 percent of the interactions on "227" were equal, 83 percent of those on the "Cosby Show" were equal, and 84 percent of those on "Charlie & Company" were coded as equal giving and taking of advice, information, or orders.

Who is doing the interacting? On "227" 58 percent of the interactions was between the husband and wife and 27 percent between mother and daughter. What is noteworthy is the low, compared to the other two statistics, amount of interaction between the father and daughter. On the "Cosby Show," the father's interactions with all 4 or his daughters are approximately the same as with his son, 15% and 16% respectively. Again, wife/husband interactions account for the largest amount, 31 percent.

Table 1 About Here

Surprisingly, the mother's interactions with her daughter comprises only 5 percent, and with her son 3 percent. Sibling interactions account for a substantial portion of the interactions; sister-sister interactions comprise 14% of the total interactions and brother-sister interactions 15 percent.

How do these findings compare with those of previous research, particularly those of Greenberg & Neuendorf (1980)? The present research found, as did Greenberg & Neuendorf, that the most active pair in Black television families is the wife-husband pair. Although there was a tendency for fathers to interact more with their sons than daughters, this was only slightly so and not markedly so as was in the pre-1980 shows analyzed by Greenberg & Neuendorf.

Perhaps, the most important finding pertains to the low amount of conflict evident in the interactions. In "Charlie & Company," 9 percent of the interactions were characterized by conflict as were 10 percent of those occurring on the "Cosby Show." "227" had the lowest amount, 4 percent. This is in contrast to previous research which found Black family interactions characterized by conflictual behavior in 17 percent of the interactions. Interestingly, the majority of the conflicts involved daughters and sisters. (It should be noted that there was little evidence of siblings being active in conflictual family role interactions as was found and reported in Greenberg & Neuendorf (1980). In "Charlie & Company," as in the other 2 shows, husband-wife interactions dominate (32%), followed by father-son interactions (18%).

It should be noted that whole family interactions account for a substantial number of interactions occurring on all 3 shows, but especially so on "Charlie & Company."

The data were then examined in terms of male/female role interactions. Clearly on the "Cosby Show," the females are the initiators, initiating over 60 percent of the interactions. Mrs. Huxtable, as wife and mother initiates over 30 percent of the interactions. Interesting, the father is the one more likely to be the receiver of an interaction, leading the list with 23 percent.

Table 2 About Here

Similarly, over 60 percent of the interactions on "227" was also female-initiated. Contrast this with "Charlie & Company," where the majority of the interactions are male initiated, with fathers and sons interaction accounting for approximately 20 percent each. On this same program males are also most likely to be the receiver of an interaction; the father, husband and the sons each received 15% of the total interactions.

Discussion

This preliminary analysis suggests that a more positive portrayal of Black families is currently emerging. That is, in shows presently being aired, Black families have both husband and wife present; these spouses interact frequently, equally, and lovingly with each other; and children are treated with respect and taught achievement-oriented values. All of this takes place in an atmosphere that harbors little conflictual behavior.

Why is this important? A great deal of the concern expressed about the portrayals of Blacks and their families is related to the perceived impact that television has on Black children. It has been suggested that Black-oriented television programs can have two (2) different effects; Graves (1980) maintains that if televised Blacks are presented in positive, non-stereotyped roles, the self-concept of Blacks who view these roles may be enhanced. However, if Blacks are portrayed in a manner which supports negative stereotypes of Blacks, the self-concept of Blacks viewing these portrayals may be lowered. Thus, in portraying Black families in a positive light, these television programs may be enhancing the self-concept of Blacks.

Additionally, it should be noted that some individuals believe that the media, particularly television, shape our ideas and attitudes about what kinds of family structures and interaction are acceptable and appropriate, and what kinds are serious or funny. The media also define for us how spouses and parents and children are "supposed" to relate to each other (Glennon & Butsch, 1982; Greenberg, et al., (1980). The implication here is that since children learn other attitudes and behaviors from the media, it is expected that they would also learn family roles, attitudes, and behaviors from the models presented in the media (Greenberg, et al., 1980; Stroman, 1983).

As a result, the above-documented step in the direction of improved images of Black family life is to be applauded. There is a need, however, for more shows like the exemplary "Cosby Show" if a balance is to be reached in televised portrayals of Black families.

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Table 1

Family Interactions by Show

Role-pair	"Cosby Show"	"227"	"Charlie & Co."
Mother-Daughter	7%	27%	12%
Mother-Son	3%		7%
Wife-Husband	31%	58%	37%
Brother-Brother			4%
Sister-Sister	14%		
Sister-Brother	15%		9%
Daughter-Father	15%	15%	13%
Father-Son	16%		18%
	N=119	N=75	N=107

Table 2

Family Role Act Initiation and Reception by Show

	Initiation			Reception		
Role	Cosby Show	227	Charlie&Co.	Cosby Show	227	Charlie&Co.
Mother	15%	7%	15%	8%	22%	7%
Father	14%	7%	20%	23%	11%	20%
Husband	8%	31%	8%	12%	23%	19%
Wife	16%	21%	16%	12%	28%	11%
Daughter	12%	35%	12%	14%	15%	15%
Son	12%		21%	3%		17%
Brother	4%		6%	9%		1%
Sister	19%		2%	18%		1%